



# *the roses of norah and nancy lindsay*

*Allyson Hayward*

*W*hen the English garden designer Norah Lindsay wrote about the roses that she grew, she called them “her children of June.” Unlike most mothers who claim that they have no favorite child, Norah Lindsay was not apologetic when naming her most treasured selections. Mrs. Lindsay clearly expressed her preferences in a romantic tangle of roses in her own garden plantings as well as in the dozens of gardens that she designed for her wealthy, aristocratic, and oftentimes royal clients.

Roses languishing on the rough-hewn arbor in the garden at the Manor House of Sutton Courtenay, 1930. (courtesy of Country Life Picture Library)





ABOVE: Norah Lindsay and Lawrence Johnston mixed roses with perennials in the Hidcote Manor Rose Walk (photo by Glyn Jones, head gardener, Hidcote Manor)

LEFT: 'Ville de Paris'  
RIGHT: 'Christopher Stone'  
(photos by Philip Robinson)

Norah's gardens were a riot of the senses, designed for the enjoyment of their sight, sound, touch, and scent. Her favorite roses were ever present. Most prevalent were the dazzling white perfection of 'Molly Sharman-Crawford', the

velvety red 'Christopher Stone', and in her opinion, the best lemon, 'Ville de Paris' (which Norah mistakenly referred to in a letter as 'Ville de Lyon'). Sheets of flowering 'Folkestone', a glorious dark red Floribunda with clusters of bright cerise centers, took up residence near a water garden, while coral pink 'Betty Uprichard' filled another section of her garden with the scent of summer. 'Mme. Alfred Carrière' and 'Dorothy Perkins' scrambled up walls, while 'Félicité Perpétue' languished over arches, and 'Fortune's Double Yellow' shot up amid the mix. The full blown pink petals of 'Captain Christy' spread at will, without restraint or restrictive boundaries. Norah planted white 'Mermaid' with its primrose-colored centers in large tubs filled with yellow delphinium (Zazil from Persia) and orange gazania, and then placed them against

grey stone walls for contrast to achieve a subtle tone-on-tone combination of color. Along these same walls, at strategic points, she planted standards of the deep yellow Hybrid Tea, 'Mrs. Wemyss Quin'.

Norah Bourke Lindsay (1873-1948) was the beautiful daughter of an upper-class family who lived her life among England's country house elite. A consummate hostess, she mingled with the political and social luminaries of the era. She lunched with Winston Churchill, gardened for the Prince of Wales, holidayed with Edith Wharton, and hobnobbed with Hollywood's Merle Oberon and Charlie Chaplin. In 1904 her home, the Manor House of Sutton Courtenay, overflowed with garden beds filled with flowers, guest room beds filled with friends, and rowing boats on the Thames filled with the handsome youth of the day—many of them the young men of Oxford University. Weekends spent in the company of Norah Lindsay were always filled with laughter, music, and glorious meals. Her houseguests were often seen happily wandering the gardens and grounds, or they might be found hunched over, weeding the front drive. Norah's magical gardens were ever evolving as she experimented and developed her skills.

In 1924, at the age of 51, with her marriage having fallen apart and her financial situation dire, she put her garden design skills to use and embarked upon a garden design career that continued for the next two decades. Her commissions ranged from manor houses on the country lanes of England to grand aristocratic estates to royal gardens on the Continent.

She wrote several articles for the magazine *Country Life*, one of which was titled *Roses of Long Ago* (1929), in which she described the roses in her gardens with accuracy, felicity, and fulsome if not sometimes over-the-top fluency. She compared roses to rich sumptuous fabrics such as silks, satins, and brocades. She likened them to egg-shell china, rich vellum, and tissue paper. She portrayed the height of rose bloom as "the month of perfume, endowed with a perilous glamour." Here is one of the more flamboyant passages she wrote:

"The most lovable of all roses, fatal in fascination and soaked in sweetness, is the moss rose, 'Les roses d'Ispahan dans leurs gaines de mousse.' Those furry buds, so cosy and content, bring back vividly the valentine of one's childhood days, with their lacy paper, moss roses of embossed satin, silver hearts entwined and





ABOVE: Frances, Lady Horner, owner of Mells Manor House said of Norah Lindsay, "She is an artist, and the garden is her paintbox." Norah designed the arching sprays of roses surrounding the sundial at Mells, 1927 (courtesy of The Earl of Oxford and Asquith, Mells Manor House)

RIGHT: Norah Lindsay (age 27) and Nancy Lindsay (age 4) photographed in the studios of society photographer Alice Hughes, circa 1900 (courtesy of the Penelope Dare Family Collection)

vows of tender promise . . .  
What other rose creates  
such an emotion?"

For several years Norah plodded along writing a manuscript that she hoped to publish under the title *Garden Idyll*. In the course of recent research, several letters were found which indicate that the book contained references to color concepts, plant combinations, her planting axioms, and what she termed the architecture of the border. One letter suggests that an unnamed author asked for input on roses for his own book, and that she was unwilling to share her rose principles because she was saving that information for a chapter in her own book. It is unclear whether that chapter was ever written. Norah completed most of the manuscript and offered it to her friend, Philip Sassoon, for comment and review. The book was never published, and the manu-

script never surfaced again after Sassoon's positive critique. Unfortunately, the whereabouts of *Garden Idyll* and Norah's further instruction on the use of roses in the garden remain a mystery to this day.

Norah's imaginative use of roses stood out in her garden designs. When Edward VIII, later the Duke of Windsor, saw her garden designs at Cliveden, the home of her clients Waldorf and Nancy Astor, he hired her on the spot. He was an avid and dedicated dirt gardener who worked alongside Norah in his own garden, often from sunup until sundown with no rest, not even for a tea break (much to Norah's regret and frequent complaint). In one of his more endearing quotes about Norah he declared, "if you had the money, she was the one to spend it." This remark was moderated with this follow-up: "her use of roses alone was worth the tuition fee." While she was still very much a

proponent of the traditional monoculture rose garden on every estate, she excelled at nestling her favorite roses into perennial beds, mixing them with herbaceous flowers, thereby adding structure to the beds and borders.

She intensely disliked the use of ivy, and thinking it provided no redeeming qualities, would indiscriminately rip it away from walls and balustrades. This completed, she would then fling veils of roses over the old moss-blurred stone walls, or over a giant staircase. Around tennis court enclosures she planted the sweet-smelling *Lonicera* 'Halliana' intermingled with scarves of white, lemon, and orange roses.

For those interested in visiting properties where Norah Lindsay once gardened, several are open to the public in the United Kingdom: Blickling Hall, Chirk Castle, Cliveden, Hidcote Manor, Mottisfont Abbey, Kelmarsh Hall, Port Lympne and Serre de la Madone in Menton, France.

Norah Lindsay's only daughter, Nancy Lindsay (1896-1973), is another story. While Norah was a gifted garden designer who was beautiful, musically talented, and the life of any party, Nancy was the opposite. She lived a bohemian, controversial, eccentric, and sometimes lonely and difficult life as an artist, nursery owner, traveler, plant collector, and gardener. Nancy Lindsay was a complicated person and the truths surrounding her legacy today are unclear and difficult to unravel.

In trying to untangle the mysteries behind the character of Nancy Lindsay, my research led me to individuals who personally knew Nancy and who could give me the clearest picture of her personality and of her gardening-related accomplishments. I have corresponded with and received impressions about Nancy from the noted horticulturalist and garden designer Graham Stuart Thomas (1909-2003), and the award-winning plantsman at Castle Howard and later Balcarres, James Russell (1920-1996). I have also been in frequent contact with Nancy's family and her closest friends.

What is known is that as an artist she specialized in botanical drawings which she sold to family members or to Norah's list of clients who, knowing of Norah's con-





stant financial struggles, sought to help underwrite Nancy in order to relieve some of Norah's worries. After the death of her mother, and the subsequent purchase by David Astor of Norah's home at the Manor House of Sutton Courtenay in Oxfordshire, Nancy was able to live on, free of charge, in the gardener's cottage of the estate. This arrangement between David Astor and Nancy was agreed upon not because of his affection for Nancy, but out of respect for Norah and what he assumed she would have wanted for her daughter. Nancy tore up the back gardens of the cottage and planted rows of perennials and roses, and renamed the backyard Manor Cottage Nurseries. She drew upon family members and Norah's list of friends for her client base as she sold off the plants in her small gardens.

Norah Lindsay is sometimes mistakenly credited with collecting roses from Persia in the 1930s, but it is actually Nancy Lindsay who carried out that achievement. One of the significant influences on Nancy Lindsay in regard to her plant collecting came from Lawrence Johnston, the owner and designer of the great gardens at Hidcote Manor in Gloucestershire. He was an important friend of Norah Lindsay's for many years and both women spent several weeks, and sometimes months each year with Johnston, gardening side by side at Hidcote Manor and at his home on the French Riviera, Serre de la Madone. Nancy was encouraged by Johnston to pursue her plant hunting, especially to Persia in the 1930s. The influences and philosophies that Johnston passed on to Nancy developed during Johnston's own plant hunting expeditions to Persia, South Africa, China, and Mexico with the great plant collectors of the day, George Forrest, Frank Kingdon-Ward, and Collingwood "Cherry" Ingram. Conditioned to Johnston's philosophy, and combined with her admiration for him, Nancy emulated his attitudes, adopted his adventurous ambitions, and planned her expeditions to Persia.

Nancy Lindsay was one of the few women whose plant collecting has been recorded as part of British gardening history. By comparison, Lady Amherst, another plant collector who gained fame a century before Lindsay, traveled and collected plants with her husband, a daughter, and a variety of aides, whereas Lindsay chose to travel and collect either

alone or with one female companion. Nancy might be more closely compared to her contemporary Gertrude E. Benham, of Buckinghamshire, who though more of an adventurer and mountain climber, traveled alone as did Lindsay, aided only by porters. She sketched and collected flowers on her journeys and sent her findings back to the Natural History Museum in exchange for small amounts of money to offset expenses. Gertrude Bell, the writer and archeologist, was also a contemporary of great courage and determination, with her lonely forays into Persia and far reaching sections of the Middle East.

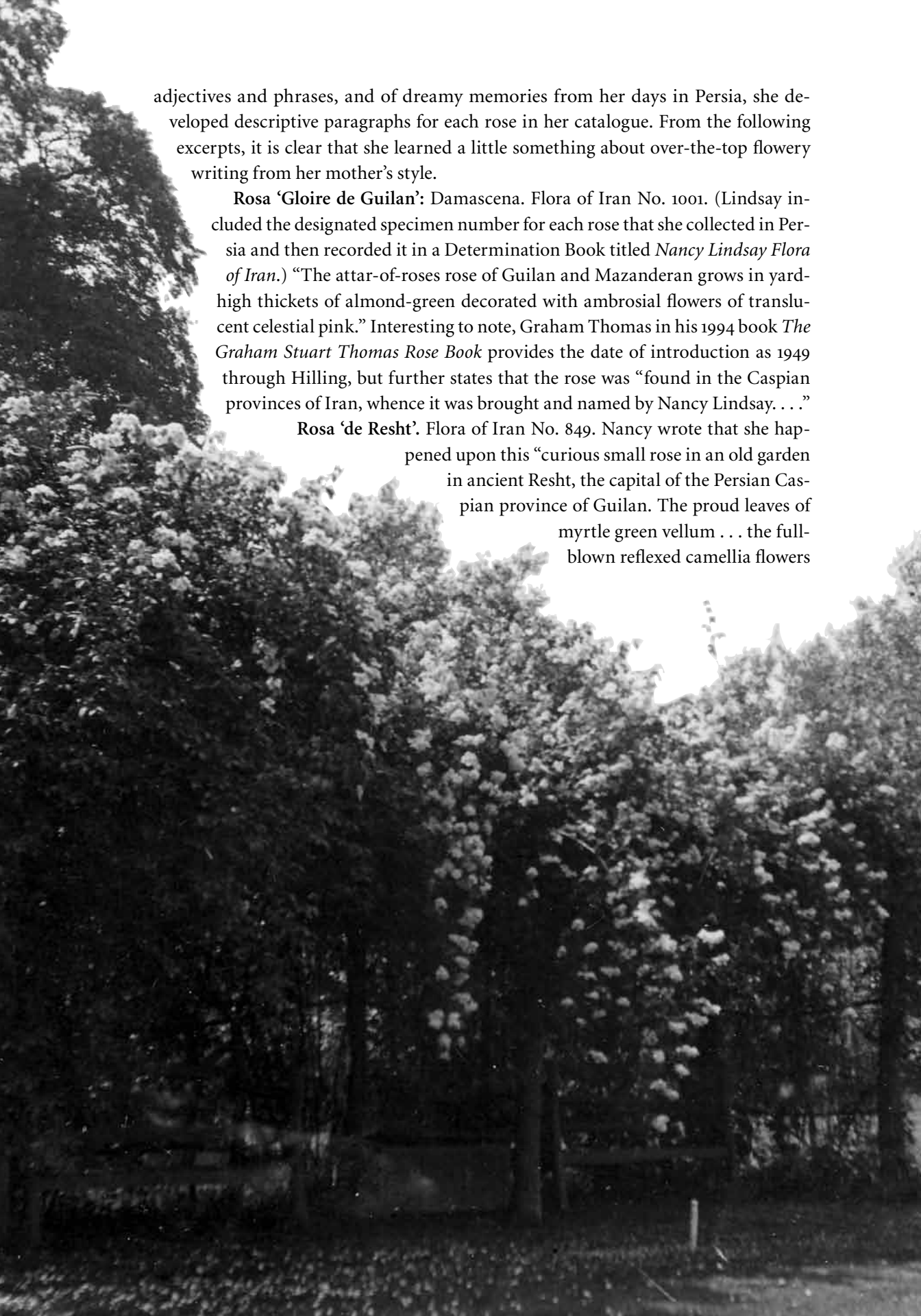
Roses remained one of Nancy Lindsay's main interests during the time of her collecting and in her subsequent garden nursery period. Little has been written about Nancy Lindsay and her many trips to Persia during the years from 1935 until 1939. One of her most important plant collecting trips, based upon some of the plant specimens that she brought back, seems to be the expedition sponsored by the Natural History Museum which left London on March 1, 1935. Nancy's traveling companion, Mrs. Alice (Azzie) Fullerton, would later chronicle this trip in a book, *To Persia for Flowers*. The first shipment of specimens that Lindsay sent back to England consisted of approximately 500 plants, historical notes in field notebooks, pressed flowers, all carefully labeled, plus boxes of roots, bulbs, and seeds.

Graham Thomas wrote in a letter to me that he knew that Nancy Lindsay discovered and named (at least) three Persian roses, which were eventually forwarded from the Natural History Museum with Nancy's blessing to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew to be held and cared for during the Second World War. Nancy was unable at that time to provide a proper garden, nor did she have the time required to keep the plants safe due to the rigors of war combined with her personal commitment to her mother's ailing health and failing financial status. Thomas acquired the roses from Kew while he was working as manager at T. Hilling & Co., Surrey. Thomas indicated to me that he then assisted in placing them into the commercial nursery trade. The roses that he referred to were *Rosa* 'Sharastanek', *Rosa* 'Gloire de Guilan', and *Rosa* 'de Resht'.

By approximately 1949, T. Hilling and others were carrying the roses, and Nancy also began selling them directly from her Manor Cottage Nurseries. She produced a nursery catalogue titled *Shrub Rose List* describing her rose offerings. From her diaries and notebooks filled with lists of unbounded



TOP TO BOTTOM: 'Captain Christy' (photo by Philip Robinson); 'Rose de Rescht' and 'Viscountess Folkestone' (photos by Marilyn Hartley)



adjectives and phrases, and of dreamy memories from her days in Persia, she developed descriptive paragraphs for each rose in her catalogue. From the following excerpts, it is clear that she learned a little something about over-the-top flowery writing from her mother's style.

**Rosa 'Gloire de Guilan':** Damascena. Flora of Iran No. 1001. (Lindsay included the designated specimen number for each rose that she collected in Persia and then recorded it in a Determination Book titled *Nancy Lindsay Flora of Iran*.) "The attar-of-roses rose of Guilan and Mazanderan grows in yard-high thickets of almond-green decorated with ambrosial flowers of translucent celestial pink." Interesting to note, Graham Thomas in his 1994 book *The Graham Stuart Thomas Rose Book* provides the date of introduction as 1949 through Hilling, but further states that the rose was "found in the Caspian provinces of Iran, whence it was brought and named by Nancy Lindsay. . . ."

**Rosa 'de Resht':** Flora of Iran No. 849. Nancy wrote that she happened upon this "curious small rose in an old garden in ancient Resht, the capital of the Persian Caspian province of Guilan. The proud leaves of myrtle green vellum . . . the full-blown reflexed camellia flowers

of pigeon's blood ruby irised with royal purple are haloed with fantastic, shagreen dragon sepals like the painted blooms on archaic Oriental faience. The folded buds are diademed with caracolling sepals intricately arabesqued; and perchance the jade poin-tille in the eye of the burst core is crowned with wanton plumes." Graham Thomas claims in a much more mundane tone (and one that does not require the repeated use of a dictionary) that it is a "highly desirable compact shrub." In recent years, the spelling of the name in nursery catalogues has inexplicably changed from Resht to Rescht. Confusion remains regarding this rose. Some believe it might be the true 'Rose du Roi'.

**Rosa 'Sharastanek':** Flora of Iran No. 465. "From a remote mountain wilderness in Northern Persia, perchance a relic of the great Iskander, the Conqueror, it is an enchanting yard-high creature with ruby stems set with grey-green leaves and emblazoned with ravishing blossoms of bright red Chinese silk, intoxicatingly fragrant." This rose was also re-introduced in the 1940s through Graham Thomas, but has all but disappeared from the nursery trade today. One of the last references found for it was written sometime in the 1950s in a letter Nancy Lindsay wrote to family friend and fellow gardener Vita Sackville-West:

"Another rare and distinct rose is the Persian I found at over 9,000 feet in the boulder-strewn wastes of the Elburz beyond the Sharastanek Valley towards Quilan. There was one tiny, lonely thicket over a trickle of water; the only patch of green for miles, where no garden has been for 2,000 years. Tradition ascribed the vast, tumbled boulders to the ruins of one of 'Alexander's Castles' i.e. of one of Alexander's generals who settled there on his return from India. I call it the 'Sharastanek Rose'. It is very distinct, very elegant, not at all a wild rose, perhaps it is the last survivor of Alexander's generals' mountain Paradise? It is a graceful, three-foot bush with lacquered cinnamon bark and small, frosted celadon-green leaves. It has small clusters of medium-sized, very double, brilliant chemise-pink, satin-petalled flowers. The pointed buds are lovely, with long, ferny sepals. It is the most deliciously and strongly fragrant rose I know."

Other roses from her trips to Persia described in the *Shrub Rose List* include these:

**Chinensis 'Samarkhand':** Flora of Iran No. 850. "The precious tea-garden talisman rose of the Caspian Provinces of Persia, brought by the caravans from the old silk roads of China in 1748; it is a graceful big bush of shining dark malachite with clusters of deliciously-scented carnation flowers of radiant carmine."

**'Rose d'Hivers':** Flora of Iran No. 1409. "Found high in the Elburz Mountains . . . exquisitely made cabbages of dawn pink shaded malmaison. Local women gathered rosegays in high summer which they preserved in vases of faience. Mature to a rich rose-du-Barry. Spicily fragrant all winter long." Again, Graham Thomas weighed in

A pathway lined with bowers of roses at the Manor House of Sutton Courtenay, 1930  
(courtesy of Country Life Picture Library)





ABOVE: 'Rose d'Hivers' (photo by Jocelyn Janon)

RIGHT: A current view through the rose gardens to the topiary loggias at Kelmarsh Hall. (courtesy of Allyson Hayward)

on this rose, without the aforementioned overblown description by Nancy Lindsay, calling it "a twiggy little bush that may be a hybrid with *Rosa* × *alba*. The flowers are dainty and of perfect shape, the large outer petals nearly white, guarding the flesh-pink central petals, which remain in bud for several days. The flowers are said to retain their shape when dried."

'Rose d'Hivers' caused quite a flap between Thomas and Lindsay. When Kew sent the idling roots and scions to Thomas at Hilling to be considered for offering to the trade, Nancy was furious. She wrote to Thomas,

"I was stunned when I saw my precious 'Rose de Hivers', N.L. 1409, in your nursery! I risked my life in the wilds of the Guilan Mountains to get that rose . . . I ought to have had stock of it and had it named and shown it myself...this was my own special rose from the wild tribal area of Guilan where probably no other European will be able to go for lifetimes . . . [it is] the darling of my heart . . . my own pet particular precious roseling whose habitat has particular memories





Roses tucked into the perennial beds at Kelmarsh Hall. The gardens were a collaboration of Norah Lindsay and Nancy Lancaster. (courtesy of Allyson Hayward)

for me.”

This all seemed to fall on deaf ears as Thomas continued with his nursery sales and even followed this tirade up with a visit to her gardens in Sutton Courtenay in the company of his friend James Russell. There they witnessed the skills of a gifted green-thumbed gardener with a substantial ego. James Russell indicated in a letter to me that he thought that if Nancy was unsure of a particular rose or plant, she would give it a romantic name that she thought was the perfect fit, and then merrily go about her business, totally oblivious to her little white lie.

The following commentary written by James Russell reveals considerable insight:

“Nancy really was the most extraordinary character. She was very much in our lives from the last two years of the war for about ten years but she always got bored with people and moved on. I was a sort of buffer between her and Gra-

ham Thomas in their great fight as to who should be ‘Queen of the Roses’, which Graham, I think quite rightly, won because Nancy’s theories were quite wild and very seldom supported by any fact. We were really very fond of her although she nearly drove us to distraction at times. She had an enormous amount of knowledge if you had the patience to wait for it to come out. Not only about plants but about food and all sorts of things. And I think she was, at one time, a very talented painter.”

A few final comments on Nancy Lindsay’s *Shrub Rose List*. Included in the list is the description of a certain rose and, in reading the entry, I am of the opinion that it is a metaphor for her mother. I know for certain that I would very much like to locate a specimen to grow in my own garden.

**Indica odorata. ‘Souvenir de Norah Lindsay’.** “A glorious scion of ‘La France’ and ‘Spanish Beauty’; a statuesque shrub with dragon-barbed mahogany canes flaunting beautiful, shining emerald leaves and clusters of several very great single chalices with wide glistening petals, flamingo-pink within, cochineal without, and flashing sunbursts of rich gold at their hearts, sweetly fragrant. The massive vermilion lacquer hips endure often all the winter through.”

Nancy Lindsay died in the Manor House Cottage in Sutton Courtenay on January 4, 1973. The Times of London ran her obituary, which began “Miss Nancy Lindsay, who died on Tuesday, was a great gardener in the exact sense. In her knowledge of plants she was probably unrivalled in Britain . . . in plant lore she was perhaps unique . . . in later years, indeed, her pronouncements were not always to be trusted; being human, if she did not know an answer, she might invent or at any rate misremember. But it was never safe to dismiss offhand anything she had to say about plants.”

Now, if only we could find that copy of the missing *Garden Idyll* by Norah Lindsay, we would be able to read everything she had to say about roses.

And finally, as we all sit holding and reading this beautiful little journal, I am reminded of a passage in my correspondence exchanges with James Russell in which he described four lovely sketches, drawn by Nancy Lindsay for a painting of ‘Rosa Mundi’, which he had hanging in his study. In closing, I offer Nancy Lindsay’s *Shrub Rose List* description of ‘Rosa Mundi’: “. . . the bizarre sport of ‘Gallica Maxima’ . . . the opulent frilled and curled flowers are striped, splashed, quartered, and flamed, with every coruscating tint of rose and red, lilac and purple on a ground of glistening ivory.”

©Allyson Hayward 2009/2010

---

ALLYSON HAYWARD is the author of *Norah Lindsay: The Life and Art of a Garden Designer* (Frances Lincoln, 2007). She is a landscape historian living in Wellesley, Massachusetts. For more information on Norah or Nancy Lindsay, or to contact Allyson, please visit [www.norahlindsay.com](http://www.norahlindsay.com).